Abstract. The article utilizes the permanent exhibitions of two recently opened museums in northern Kyushu—the Kyushu National Museum and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum—to explore how a more “Asian” national identity might emerge in Japan in the context of 21st Century East Asia. It does this by discussing the geographic, historical and intellectual context that produced these museums, each of which focuses on cultural connections that link Japan and Asia in the premodern and modern periods, respectively.

Fukuzawa Yukichi’s famous 1885 exhortation to Japan to “leave Asia and join the West” (datsu-a nyū-ō) is often brought up as a point of reference in discussions of national identity in modern Japan. The point in doing so is not to say that Japan successfully pulled off such a feat even figuratively (at the very least, this would certainly be impossible in a literal sense) but to stress the liminality of the space in which Japan found itself with respect to national identity when it chose to pursue a modernization strategy involving the systematic incorporation of Western institutions and culture in the wake of the 1868 Meiji Restoration. The result was a situation in which Japan, as the first non-Western Great Power, found itself neither
fully “Western” nor fully “Asian,” and this, in turn, set in motion complex discursive dynamics that has served as a primary problem- atique among Japan-focused intellectual and cultural historians. One major consequence of this context was to make it extremely difficult for Japanese to identify in any meaningful way with the rest of Asia. The most pervasive tendency was to see Asia, as expressed by Fuku- zawa in the preceding slogan, as a social and cultural backwater still mired in a cultural world that Japan had left behind. This could have both positive and negative implications—that is, the “old” Asian society and cultures were anachronisms that should be discarded or, alternatively, were admirable but disappearing traditions that should be returned to. Either way, however, there was little room for a sense of a common Asian identity that tied modern Japan to the Asian continent. And while perhaps not the sole cause, such a cultural and intellectual environment certainly facilitated Japan’s tragic interaction with the Asian continent during the first half of the 20th Century. Japan’s rapid rise to “economic superpower” status in the wake of World War II, in turn, did little to encourage a reversal of such attitudes among mainstream Japanese.¹

The economic success of the so-called Newly Industrializing Economies (NIEs) and ASEAN since the 1980s and, since the 1990s, China, and the social and cultural globalization that has accompanied this, however, appear to be rapidly eroding many of the deep social and cultural gaps that had in the past served as the foundation for the rejection of identification with “Asia” on the part of the Japanese. This changing situation gives rise to the question, is there room for more of an “Asian” national identity in Japan in the 21st century and, if so, what might it look like?

The following essay represents a tentative stab at addressing this question. Specifically, the paper analyzes the way in which two museums have discursively constructed elements of an “Asian” Japanese national identity. The two museums are located in or in the vicinity of the city of Fukuoka. Located as it is directly across from the southern tip of the Korean peninsula on the northwestern tip of

¹ Morris-Suzuki 1998 provides a useful brief but broadly framed discussion.
Japan’s westernmost main island of Kyushu, Fukuoka (aka Hakata), as Bruce Batten stresses in his seminal work (2006), is a natural gateway for Japanese interactions with the Asian continent. Over the course of multiple millennia it has functioned as the conduit through which the advanced technology and culture of the mainland flowed into Japan. It has, historically, been the site of thriving commercial exchange with the continent as well. Less positively, it has also served on several occasions as the launching point for Japanese invasions of continental Asia, as well as the site of the Mongols’ near-invasion of Japan in the 13th Century, and more recently the primary point of disembarkation for Japanese nationals returning from the continent after the end of World War II. This background of extensive interaction on the part of Fukuoka with the Asian continent has left its mark on the local culture. Monuments celebrating historical incidents involving interaction of various sorts with the continent are scattered throughout the city. The municipal government’s website trumpets the “wellsprings of Asian vitality” of the city’s residents along with its ostensible destiny as a “hub of exchange” with the continent in the coming “New Era for Kyushu and Asia.” Thanks to this history and as is evidenced by popular books on the subject (e.g., Iwanaka 2002), Fukuokans consider themselves and are considered by outsiders to be “different” from other Japanese, so much so that some have even declared the city to be a “foreign country.” If Fukuoka’s identity stems from its extensive interaction with the Asian mainland, then the (re)rise of Asia since the last decades of the 20th Century and Japan’s deepening economic, political, and cultural interaction with the rest of Asia should simultaneously move the rest of Japan closer culturally to Fukuoka while creating a context in which Fukuoka can serve as a vanguard model from which the rest of the country can take its cues.

**The Kyushu National Museum**
The Kyushu National Museum (KNM), which opened in 2005 in Dazaifu on the outskirts of Fukuoka, is Japan’s fourth and most recent officially designated *kokuritsu hakubutsukan* or “national museum.” It is the first such museum to be established since the open-
ing of the Kyoto National Museum in 1897. Like the latter and its other counterparts in Tokyo (established in 1872) and Nara (established 1895), the attribute that distinguishes the KNM as a kokuritsu hakubutsukan from the various other categories of museums established and overseen by the Japanese state, is the centrality in its overall mission of the function of preserving and making accessible officially designated “national treasures” (kokuhō) and other important cultural assets (bunkazai). According to figures made public at the time of its opening, the KNM’s collection contained 3 national treasures and 21 important national cultural assets. (Dainobu 2005) These are figures that are considerably lower than in the other national museums where national treasures range in number from 12 to 87 and important cultural assets run in the three digit range, but are certainly sufficient to justify its classification as a kokuritsu hakubutsukan.

As expressed from the time of some of the earliest planning documents, the Kyushu National Museum was conceived as a “new design museum” that would diverge in important ways from the approach taken in the older national museums that were brought into being over a century earlier. (Bunkachō 1999, p. 155) Whereas its older counterparts focus on the aesthetic aspects of premodern works of art, the new museum was to focus its “cultural assets” collection efforts on archaeological artifacts and historical documents. In light of the dramatic advances in museum technology that occurred over the century-plus time span that separated the establishment of the Kyushu museum from its older counterparts, the “new design museum” was mandated to harness new technologies in order to create a “living” museum that would go beyond the simple display of objects in glass cases as was the pre-existing norm. And where its counterpart museums, as “national museums” linked to the Japanese state, tended to stand somewhat aloof from the local communities that surrounded them, the new museum was encouraged to actively foster links with the local community. This stipulation was also a reflection of the highly active grass roots campaign and the lobbying associated with it that was the driving force is pushing the project forward.²

² Boosters in Fukuoka characterized their efforts as the culmination of a hundred-year campaign to get a national museum built in Kyushu. The
Of greatest significance for the purposes of this essay, however, is the fourth stipulation. This was that the thematic focus of the museum was to be Japan’s historical interaction with the rest of Asia. This was justified on three grounds:

- There is a need for our nation to not simply be conscious of the importance of Asia from a political and economic perspective, but in addition to encourage a thriving of cultural exchanges with Asian countries of a sort that will deepen mutual understanding and contribute to Asia.
- The times demand that a museum be built that adopts a new viewpoint in which “the formation of Japanese culture is captured from the perspective of Asian history.”
- It is appropriate for Kyushu to be its site given the large role played by Kyushu in exchanges between Japan and the various parts of Asia in the premodern period. (Bunkachō 1999, p. 155)

The older national museums do acknowledge the historical links between premodern Japan and Asia (indeed it would be impossible to do otherwise and still maintain credibility as a museum), but thematically their displays tend to highlight the aesthetic refinements of and distinctive attributes added to imported forms once they reached Japanese shores and how these reflect distinctively Japanese sensibilities. Such an approach, of course, is quite consistent with the traditional function of national museums “to mark out some form of cultural distinctiveness which has a relationship to a bounded territory.” (Mason 2007, 103) In this sense, a mission oriented toward highlighting the interconnections between Japanese culture and the rest of Asia marks a clear departure. In terms of identity discourse, it marks a shift from the promotion of a Japanese identity as a unique culture to one that encourages an “Asian” Japanese national identity.

hundred-year characterization is based on the claim that in 1899 Okakura Tenshin (aka Kakuzō), arguably the most prominent figure in the national artistic community at the time, visited Fukuoka and proclaimed the need for a national museum based in Kyushu.
The museum that opened in 2005 faithfully reflected the four parameters stipulated for it in the vision established for it in the early 1990s. The KNM’s permanent exhibit does indeed contain a considerably higher proportion of archaeological artifacts and historical documents—and a correspondingly lower quotient of artistic works—than do the three other national museums. It incorporates advanced, state-of-the-art technologies in a variety of areas, including a theater equipped with high-definition video projection equipment, sophisticated display lighting techniques, extensive use of computer graphics, a concrete-reinforced temperature-and-humidity-controlled collection storage vault, and a futuristic looking, earthquake resistant building. Links to the local community are manifested in the form of the extensive use of volunteers, an active support association and a variety of outreach programs.

The museum’s mandate to highlight Japan’s cultural interactions with Asia over the course of its history is systematically manifested in the permanent exhibit entitled, appropriately, “Ocean Ways, Asian Paths.” The basic theme is implanted symbolically at the entrance to the museum. Between the 7th and 12th century Dazaifu served as Japan’s “western capital” and the reception point for delegations from the Asian continent. The first display that a visitor encounters as he or she enters the permanent exhibit area is a computer graphic reenactment on a large video display of just such a delegation being received at the old Dazaifu government office whose ruins can still be seen down the hill from the museum. The next display that a visitor encounters is a full-scale reproduction of a Sixth century Kyushu *kofun* replete with mirrors and other artifacts of mainland origin. This practice of displaying items of foreign and Japanese origin side-by-side is repeated in other parts of the exhibit. Together, the two displays of ancient Japanese interaction with the continent serve as both the physical and thematic axis around which the remainder of the permanent exhibit revolves. From a thematic standpoint, they reinforce the point that cultural contact with the Asian mainland was a feature present at the very start of Japanese state formation.

The rest of the permanent exhibit is divided into five sections, each covering a specific period of pre-1868 Japanese history. The
first section devoted to the Jōmon period highlights how ice age-era Japan was connected to the Asian continent by land, and how this made possible the initial populating of the archipelago. The subsequent Yayoi Period-focused section portrays how the introduction of a new agricultural technology—that is, wet rice agriculture—set the stage for state formation in Japan. The third section goes on to track the process through which Buddhism and Chinese civilization reshaped Japanese society and provided the fundamental elements that remain at the core of Japanese culture and civilization today. The symbolic embodiment of this general theme is a recreation of a 7th to 9th Century ship of the sort that would have carried kentōshi of the period to and from Tang China. The fourth section covering the 11th to the 16th centuries features a wide variety Japanese and foreign artifacts that demonstrate the thriving commercial interaction between Japan and the continent. In the fifth museum section, the arrival of the Western ships in the late 16th Century forces a break in the exclusive focus on interaction with the Asian mainland. But unlike the tendency in the past to emphasize the isolationism of the Edo Period and, in covering exceptions to sakoku, to highlight trade with the Dutch in Nagasaki exclusively, diplomatic exchanges and trade with Korea (through Tsushima), trade with the Ryukyu Kingdom (via Satsuma), and the resident Chinese trading community in Nagasaki are all prominently featured in the coverage of the period. The slant given to the period is succinctly expressed in the title of an article associated with the section covering this period in the museum’s official catalog that asks, “Open, or Shut Up?” (Kyūshū Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, 2005, 90)

Outside of the permanent exhibit one can point to a number of features associated with the KNM that suggest that what is at work here is indeed an attempt at identity construction, and not merely an exercise in historical exegesis. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the permanent exhibit’s “catalog” entitled Asiage—i.e., Asia + Age. With its considerable number of essays adorned with colorful graphic designs, it resembles the sort of magazine one finds in the seat pocket of an airliner or a “hip” magazine devoted to contemporary art or music more than it does a traditional museum catalog. This, along
with the extensive use of youthful language forms reveal an effort to appeal to young people, specifically by drawing parallels between the past depicted in the museum’s exhibit and the surrounding early 21st century context, as when it compares the adoption of Chinese culture during the 7th to 9th century to ongoing efforts in Japan today to reform the Japanese economy to bring it in line with “global standards.” Elsewhere, it is also evident in the “Asian grassy field” (Ajippa), a “hands on” play area for children stocked with a variety of Asian objects that can be worn, touched or otherwise played with. The museum also features an “exchange plaza” where craftsmen are brought in from other Asian countries to demonstrate their production techniques and a variety of imported Asian products are sold.

Fukuoka Asian Art Museum
The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) was established by the City of Fukuoka in 1999 and bills itself as “the only museum in the world that systematically collects and exhibits Asian modern and contemporary art.” According to its web site, as of April 2006 its collection numbered over 2,000 pieces from 21 Asian countries, almost all of them dating from the 19th century onward. In addition to its permanent and special exhibits, FAAM houses substantial studio space for use by invited Asian artists. It holds a variety of seminars and programs, foremost among them being the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. The number of Japanese pieces in its collection is very limited, but this is more a product of an administrative division of labor than an absence of interest in modern Japanese art per se. This is because the nearby Fukuoka Art Museum has an extensive collection of Japanese and Western art and services the needs of the community in those areas. In fact, the FAAM, as will be detailed momentarily can be considered the offspring of the Fukuoka Art Museum or, alternatively, its Asian art branch. At one level, the FAAM’s opening in 1999 can be considered a product of the same enthusiasm on the part of local boosters in Fukuoka to capitalize

on the area’s historical connections with the Asian continent that facilitated the construction of the Kyushu National Museum. At a more profound level, and of more profound significance from the standpoint of discussion of an “Asian” identity on the part of Japan, FAAM’s creation was also the culmination of a re-thinking of the nature of modern Asian art.

From its opening in 1979, the Fukuoka Art Museum, in an inclination that was unusual for a Japanese art museum but reflective of the local identity, displayed a strong interest in modern Asian art. This predilection came to be manifested in an institutionalized manner in an event known as the Asian Artists Exhibition held every five years or so. The largest of these exhibitions (the second in 1980) involved the participation of some 450 artists from 13 Asian countries. One of the byproducts of these repeated encounters with Asian art was a reflexive questioning of the premises underlying the way in which contemporary Asian art was viewed. In the words of FAAM curator Ushiroshoji Masahiro, those involved gradually grew conscious of the fact that the general public, the Japanese curators, and even the invited Asian artists themselves were trapped in a “dualism” of ‘backward Asia’ and ‘the advanced West’ and were assessing Asian art using a “yardstick in which Western art served as the standard.” Those involved remained entrapped by this dualism even when they consciously reacted against it. As Ushiroshoji put it, they “turned to the ‘great Asian’ tradition.” The problem, however, was that this tradition “lay in the past,” and what such rebels ended up embracing was a “trite, egocentric, self-serving image of an Asia that did not actually exist.” What was needed, it came to be realized, was to establish “an unbiased gaze” capable of “grasp[ing] contemporary Asian art as a true expression of individuals living in the present day.” Thanks to this collective epiphany, this new gaze implanted itself incrementally over the course of the 1980s and 1990s as a byproduct of these recurring exhibitions. Then, thanks to the financial confidence fostered by Japan’s booming Bubble Economy of the late 1980s, this experience coalesced in early 1990s into a plan to articulate this new perspective on Asian art in a new museum devoted exclusively to art of modern and contemporary Asia.
The new gaze is embodied in a collection policy in which the Museum “systematically collects modern and contemporary artworks that show the originality and distinctive aesthetics of Asian art without adhering to the framework of ‘fine art’ derived from modern Western value.” Given the background just described, it is not surprising that this “uniqueness” is not the equivalent of “exotic.” First, the distinguishing feature of Asian art of the modern and contemporary periods is understood to lie in the profound impact that the West has had on Asian art, and one whose impact is understood to have been manifested in two different but related forms—namely, on the one hand, in the work of Asian artists who incorporated Western styles and techniques in their work and, on the other, those who reacted against such tendencies by “rediscovering” and frequently inventing Asian “traditions” that they incorporated into their work. In other words, as they shifted their gaze, the museum’s curators transformed Western art from a standard used to classify and judge Asian art into a historical force that explains the developments and tendencies in modern and contemporary Asian art.

A second basic principle adhered to in FAAM’s collection policy is to concentrate on collecting Asian “folk art, ethnic art, and popular art” that in the past had not been considered art at all. Ushiroshoji explains the rationale behind this as follows:

The birth of the term “art” simultaneously entailed the emergence of that which was not art. One of the Asian Art Museum’s goals is to reinterpret through the collection the meaning and value of works that did not fit under the Western definition of art or were given the cold shoulder as a result of the practice of equating modernization with Westernization. Instead of viewing the modern era in Asian art simply in terms of the formula “modernization equals Westernization,” as has been true in the past, the Asian Art Museum believes that a re-examination of the era from the perspective of the things that were excluded under the formula can offer a multifaceted vision of modern Asian art. (Fukuoka Ajia Bijutsukan 2002, 146)

Examples of what is being referred to here is touristic keepsake art with “exotic” depictions of Asia like those produced for Western visitors in the form of the so-called Company School paintings of India and China Trade paintings in China. Others are the commercial,

propaganda, and practical “art” exemplified by such items found in FAAM’s collection of advertisements, Maoist posters, and Bengla Deshi rickshaws.

At this point, a reader might legitimately ask, in what sense, then, can the FAAM’s discursive contextualization of Asian art be considered a discourse on Japanese identity? One can begin with the following passage in a publication that is the functional equivalent of a FAAM catalog: “The Museum, naturally enough, considers Japan a member Asia. Instead of following the conventional approach to modern Japanese art, which contrasts the West against Japan or treats the West as the advanced model and Japan as its pupil, the Museum’s aim is to explore an image of Japanese art as part of Asian art.” As such, Japanese art is understood to be part of the larger flow of development in Asian and as such to have exhibited parallel trends. Thus, where on the one hand, one current of Asian art is understood to be works by Asian artists who used techniques associated with Western art, we see a corresponding set of genres in Japan’s kindai yōga (modern Western-style painting) and kindai chōkoku (modern sculpture). And where, on the other hand, the Museum focuses on “works with ties to tradition, which was discovered, and occasionally created, in an effort to combat the overwhelming impact of the West during the process of modernization,” one can observe a parallel in Japan in the emergence during the modern period of nihonga (Japanese-style painting) and other modern media of expression using “traditional” techniques. Examples of these are featured prominently in the Fukuoka Art Museum. (Fukuoka Ajia Bijutsukan 2002, 146)5

5 One might note that what is perhaps the most widely noted work by a Japanese artist in the Museum’s collection is a multimedia installation that satirizes the notion of an invented tradition. The piece by Ozawa Tsuyoshi entitled the “Museum of Soy Sauce Art” consists of a “museum” whose display traces the development over the ages of the nonexistent Japanese “tradition” of “soy sauce painting.” An online treatment of this “tradition” can be found at the following: http://www.monkeyw.com/soy/index2.html.

6 It might be noted in this context that this line of classification and interpretation parallels that found in the National Museum of Modern Art in
Conclusion

One can, of course, make too much of what amounts to not much more than a rather cursory overview of the backgrounds of two local museums in southwestern Japan and the content of their permanent exhibitions. Nonetheless, it would appear that, in a context in which the relative standing of and relations between Japan and the rest of Asia are undergoing a profound shift, the significance of the KNM and the FAAM and the curatorial strategies being pursued there have a significance beyond the simple affirmation of a local identity in a region of Japan somewhat remote from the capital, and can be considered to be phenomena that highlight aspects of how Japanese national identity might evolve in the 21st century. First off, the KNM clearly demonstrates that there is a long history of interaction with the Asian mainland and that there are ample grounds for developing an understanding of Japanese traditions as being deeply rooted in a larger regional history, and by doing so to move away from the sort of Japanese-culture-is-unique interpretation of Japanese tradition that has tended to predominate in the recent past. The fact that the KNM is a kokuritsu hakubutsukan, furthermore, highlights how the Japanese state has, at the very least tentatively, shown a willingness to “buy into” such a discourse.7 Japan’s modern history and modern Japanese identity, of course, cannot be discussed without reference to the profound impact of the West on Japan. What the experience of the FAAM curators and its collection highlight, however, is that this is not in and of itself a barrier to an “Asian” identity, as has been the predominant assumptive tendency until now. Rather, it is this very encounter with the West and the way in which this encounter has shaped national culture that defines national identity in modern Asia and provides a key condition for establishing an “Asian” Japanese identity today. Put slightly differently, the decolonization of Asia after World War II, along with the modernization and even

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7 It is worth noting that the City of Fukuoka had already built a museum that focuses on the city’s history of interaction with the Asian continent well before (it opened in 1990) the opening of the KNM.
post-modernization of Japan’s closest neighbors in East Asia specifically, has meant that the liminality that came into being as a result of Japan’s modernization and Westernization is eroding. What is emerging is an Asia that contemporary Japan can increasingly identify with and, turning Fukuzawa’s dictum on its head, “re-join” in a figurative *datsu-ō nyū-a*. Clearly, because of its distinctive local history and cultural identity, currents of this sort are bound to manifest themselves in the Fukuoka area first. The fact that they dovetail with shifts in the larger context in which 21st Century Japan finds itself suggests that they are most likely not simply exceptional local developments, but harbingers of future trends.

References


